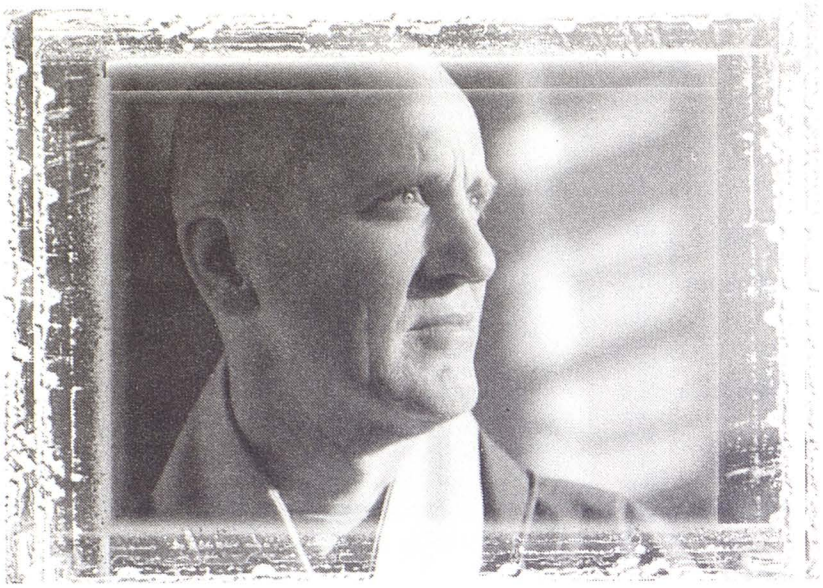

THE PRACTICE OF LISTENING

Formal dharma speech by Zen Master Dae Gak at Buddha's Enlightenment Day, Providence Zen Center, December 5, 1998.

[Raises Zen stick over head, then hits table with stick.]

This whole world is turning, turning, turning.

Before listening appeared, there was no "Buddha's enlightenment."

[Raises Zen stick over head, then hits table with stick.]

After listening appeared, "Buddha's enlightenment" also appeared.

[Raises Zen stick over head, then hits table with stick.]

Buddha's enlightenment is not separate from listening. Listening is not separate from Buddha's enlightenment.

When listening, Buddha's enlightenment, appearing, and disappearing no longer exist.

What, then, becomes clear?

HO!

Thank you all for coming and listening.

I've been studying Chinese characters. There is something disheartening about studying Chinese characters at age fifty-one. I studied fifty-five characters in a book, turned the page, and it said, "End of first grade." I was proud of my accomplishment—I had achieved first grade level.

The character for "listening attentively" consists of five characters: the character for ear, the character for standing still, the character for ten, the character for eye, and the character for heart or mind. Chinese characters are really picturegrams: they are pictures that have evolved to describe a certain situation. This picturegram for listening attentively means: "When in stillness, one listens with the heart. The ear is worth ten eyes."

聽

The character for sacred, holy, or saint is made up of three characters: the character for ear, the character for hole (which is taken phonetically to mean clear), and the character for standing still. Thus, a saint is one who, in stillness, hears clearly; or, what is holy or sacred is being able to hear clearly, which evolves to being able to hear the word of God or being able to hear the sound of Buddha's voice.

聖

Listening is fundamental to our practice. Our school is called the Kwan Um School of Zen. "Kwan Um" means "perceive sound," or to listen. Kwan Seum Bosal, the bodhisattva of compassion, realized her enlightenment by hearing the sound of human suffering—through listening, through this human practice of hearing.

In our own lives, we know that we hear clearly relative to the clarity of our mind. When our mind is cluttered or troubled, our hearing is distorted. Indeed all sense data

becomes distorted with an unclear mind. There is a psychological practice, a game, where you sit with ten or fifteen people. One person whispers something in the ear of the first person, and the whispering goes all the way around. When it comes out at the other end, it is very unlike what was said initially. Our practice is to clear the mind in such a way that we can hear clearly. We want to hear clearly so that we can function correctly.

In our Korean tradition, Chinul talks about tracing the radiance back. This is the practice of listening to the very sound of listening itself: to be able to sit with one's own mind, not following the mind and all of the tangents that it offers, but to sit quietly and listen. At first, we sit down and our minds begin to settle like dirt settles on a dirt road after a car goes by. There is some clarity. Then we begin to listen to our own fundamental nature. Having heard our own fundamental nature, we begin to listen to our friend, whoever that is. Listening to our friend is not complete without some action, some response. There is no true listening if our listening is limited to our own particular experience. The true practice of listening requires some kind of compassionate action.

Originally in Buddhism, there was a great emphasis on wisdom, on nirvana. Historically, students were encouraged to focus on their own personal samadhi. Students would sit for long periods of time, have some great experience, and believe that their life was complete. It was believed that seeing into the nature of phenomena was enough.

Christianity, in contrast, has stressed compassion: Even though we can question whether there is true wisdom left in Buddhism or true compassion left in Christianity, the fundamental movement of Christianity is toward helping others, toward compassion. Christ's teaching, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you," "treat your neighbor as yourself," is a fundamentally compassionate teaching. It was not until Mahayana Buddhism appeared that compassion became integral to Buddhist practice. It is in their meeting in compassion that Zen and Christianity are reconciled.

In the mid-1980s when Zen Master Seung Sahn taught at the Abbey of Gethsemani, a Trappist monastery in Kentucky, one of the kong-ans he offered the monks was the teaching, "Be still and know that I am God." What is the meaning of "Be still—know that I am God"? In stillness, one is able to hear without distortion. The still mind is not cluttered with particular karma, judgment, blame, dissatisfaction with self and other, or feelings of entitlement.

Well before Bodhidharma came to China, the Chinese emperor Wu had already built many Buddhist temples and was supporting the education of thousands of Buddhist monks.

Upon meeting Bodhidharma, Emperor Wu said, "I have built a lot of temples. I have fostered and supported Buddhism in many, many ways. What merit have I attained from this?"

Bodhidharma said, "No merit. Clear like space."

This enraged Emperor Wu. There was a breakdown in communication, and Bodhidharma left and went north to sit in a cave. Being unable to hear "true merit," having some idea of what enlightenment, merit, or accomplishment was, Emperor Wu became enraged. He was not yet able to hear that no merit, no thing, is better than a good thing.

Emperor Wu went to his spiritual advisor and said, "Who was this guy that talked to me, the emperor, like this?"

His spiritual advisor said, "This was Bodhidharma. He is the avatar of Avalokitesvara. He is the very bodhisattva of compassion himself."

Emperor Wu said, "I'll send somebody to get him! I've made a big mistake here!"

And the spiritual advisor said, "Even if you send all of your armies and all of your townspeople, you cannot bring Bodhidharma back."

Why?

This is the fundamental teaching, that our listening practice does not occur outside of us, or in someone else. Where there is a special one, there is always suffering, whether that special one is one's own self, a teacher, a god, a bodhisattva. When one measures oneself separate from, puts something or someone on a pedestal, there is suffering. There is an old Hindu saying: "The mind of measure cannot know God."

Originally, Zen appeared because of sutra practice. Buddhism appeared because of the Buddha's practice, sitting under a tree and listening to the night noises, listening to his question, listening to his doubt, listening to the demons that appeared—not unlike what we do every day when we practice. Then a religion began to develop around it, and there appeared forms,

the true practice of listening requires compassionate action

and the forms lost their functionality. We say they became "functionally autonomous." If you give a monkey a coin every time it does a certain trick, so that it can buy bananas, at some point the monkey begins to do the trick just to get the coin. That's called capitalism. When they have all the food they need and everything they could possibly want, they begin to amass these coins far beyond any redeemable value.

Rules appear, religion appears, and there is suffering because people are then judged relative to these rules. Rules lose their functional meaning. Bowing stops being a practice of appreciation and becomes a practice of deference. Two ideas appear: one is that we bow to a teacher as a deference, and we put them higher than us and some resentment appears, and we say, "I'm not going to bow." A sense of dualism. The practice of bowing loses its function, its purpose, as an expression of one's true nature.

Giving becomes an obligation. We begin to tithe. We see religions now demanding a certain tithe instead of us supporting, out of the generosity of our heart, our particular sangha. We begin to feel obligated. Religion happens when sangha or congregation loses its enlightenment, loses its precepts, in a way.

I came to the Providence Zen Center before it was Kwan Um School of Zen, out of some desire for support to practice. I had practiced for ten years with Japanese-style teachers, and for whatever reason, I never made a particularly strong connection. When I came to the Providence Zen Center, I met Bobby and Linc, George, and See Hoy (Su Bong Sunim), and became a member of a family. Sometimes a difficult family, sometimes a joyous family, but family nonetheless, in the sense of people with a strong direction, and whose direction was luminous to the point where it brightened my path and helped me find my direction. It is not without some nostalgia and sadness that I think back on those times. There was a kind of innocence, of not-knowing and wonder.

Linc Rhodes used to come to Kentucky. Bobby and George and other people came also, but Linc used to come most of all. We would have retreats in people's homes, and he would come no matter what. If there were three people sitting, he would come; if there were ten people sitting, he would come. We never had many more than ten or eleven people in Kentucky in those times. He would come, and he would come cheerfully and with a great deal of support for what we were doing. I remember Mara and me taking precepts the first time, and Linc's support, like a brother, just completely present. That's the meaning of sangha, the true meaning of religion: you have friends who come together, maybe for a short period of time or a long period of time—we come together, our lives touch, and we encourage each other toward clarity and compassion. We support each other in this quest to look beyond our own personal conditioning and our own mind habit, and find what it means to be human beyond what we have been taught. What it means to be human in some fundamental way.

Bodhidharma went off to the cave and sat for nine years. He sat in the very practice of listening. The marvelous thing about listening is that it doesn't arise, it doesn't cease, and it really can't be brought about. It is our birthright, just as enlightenment is each of our birthright. Enlightenment is not something that a special few have or can get.

Once I met a Zen Master who said, in Japan, he had fifty monks and laymen, and many of them were westerners, and of those fifty he thought maybe one could attain enlightenment. I think you know how many people are here—maybe seventy-five? There is not a person here who cannot realize their true self. It is not dependent on anything. It's not special. It's not esoteric. To lose this sense is to lose our practice.

It is not something that someone has, it's not something someone gets—it is who you are. It's like waking up in bed and realizing you were there all along, having a dream. One doesn't have to go to bed, find the bed—you are there, you just have to wake up in it. How much do you believe that? Having realized that, and believing that, how willing are you to help others?

Bodhidharma went and sat in the cave, and Hui Ko came to practice with him. He didn't read in a newsletter that Bodhidharma was having a retreat. He had a dream that his teacher was in the north, and through great hardship, he traveled north to sit with Bodhidharma. When he got there, Bodhidharma was in a cave, sitting, looking at the wall. Hui Ko knocked on the cave, but Bodhidharma didn't turn around. The legend says Hui Ko stood there until the snow piled up three feet high on his shoulders. No response. What was Hui Ko doing while he was standing there? What was his practice when he was standing there? He was listening for his teacher. With luminous attention, he was standing and listening. With luminous patience and courage, he was standing and listening, waiting. Getting no response, the legend says he cut off his arm and handed it to the teacher, and at this, Bodhidharma turned around—whether he actually did this or whether this is legend, that Hui Ko gave something of himself away—he got the teacher's attention. He got one question out of that: one arm, one question.

Hui Ko said, "My mind is ill at ease. How do I put my mind to rest?" Bodhidharma said, "Bring me your mind." Hui Ko sat and looked with all sincerity: he didn't think it was a kong-an he had to figure out and get by, he didn't take it as some kind of trick question, that he had to jump through a hoop in order to get a certain kind of attention from Bodhidharma. He saw it as a true, sincere question that hit the very core of his being. "You say that your mind is not at rest, so please bring it to me." With all sincerity, Hui Ko looked, and had some opening, and said, "I can't

find it anywhere." And Bodhidharma said, "Yes. Now your mind is at rest."

Later, it is said they were walking. In those days, the student always walked three paces behind the teacher, just outside the shadow. Bodhidharma said, "You understand China. I don't, I'm from India. Which way should I go?" And Hui Ko said, "Only go straight." (He was a good Zen student at the time.) Bodhidharma said, "One more step is not possible." At this, Hui Ko's final enlightenment appeared. Hearing this, his mind burst open and became the only link in the chain from Buddha to Cumberland. Bodhidharma gave transmission to two people, but one died, so Hui Ko is that one link—but it is a link that is so strong, with such dedication, that it has endured for over two thousand years.

We have this Buddha's Enlightenment Day ceremony, celebrating enlightenment that has many names: grace, God, Buddha-mind, listening, compassion. They all point to the same without-self, without-idea mind. We celebrate it in our ancestors, we celebrate it in ourselves, and we celebrate it in each other. The practice of this celebration can be the practice of coming together that we have done today; it can also be the practice of everyday mind in Zen. Most people learn fairly quickly how to sit, appearing quiet. Most people learn fairly quickly how to manage the forms. Most difficult is translating the practice from the cushion to your everyday life. One can have enormous, marvelous experiences on the cushion and stand up and be irritable and mean and small-minded. Probably no one here has had that experience! *[laughter]* Certainly, we have all had that experience, and certainly we have judged others. "They are supposed to be a great enlightened being. Why do they treat me this way?" Taking our practice off the cushion is very difficult.

One of the things I have been looking at recently is the practice of appreciation. The word "appreciation" has, in some connotations, the meaning "to like," but the true meaning of appreciation is merely to accept. I appreciate that you came. Not that I appreciate in a grandiose way—just the acknowledgment of the fact. To meet one's moment is to appreciate. When the mind is cluttered and painfully self-inflicting torture, it is in that moment that we are tested or encouraged toward the greatest appreciation. Really appreciate that mind—the mind of delusion. The mind of suffering. Can we appreciate it so fully that we realize that it is not "my" mind, but "human" mind? When I am depressed, it is not my depression; this is difficult, but can we appreciate depression itself? When we need a friend, can we appreciate that meeting? When we drink a cup of water, can we be present so that we can appreciate the water? It doesn't have to be fancy or with lots of thinking in terms of who brought me the water, if the water is pure, if there are people who don't have clean water (which is political), but just the very act of drinking itself—it doesn't have to be dualistic in the sense of

listening doesn't arise, doesn't cease, and can't be brought about

"I appreciate having water because I can imagine not having water," but the very fact of moment by moment by moment.

Try this as a practice on your own: take into your own consciousness the question, "What is it that is the hardest for me to appreciate?" Is there someone in your life? Is there some phenomenon? What is it that is hardest for me to appreciate? I can appreciate almost everything, but not that. It is right there that your practice begins.

In our school, we have these marvelous teachings: put it all down, don't hold anything, don't check. The activity of putting it all down, the activity of not checking, the activity of "don't hold anything," is appreciation: to appreciate the cushion that is holding you up, to appreciate your breath as it rises and falls—not to adjust your breath in some particular way ("Oh, my breath is really deep now and I must be in some kind of great samadhi," because you know that when that happens, in the next moment you're frustrated because your breath isn't so deep and you are not in a great samadhi). To appreciate both the deep and the shallow, to appreciate both profound and mundane, to appreciate that we are all human and doing our best. That's the meaning of Buddha's enlightenment. That's the meaning of Buddha's teaching. To sit on the universal sun where moon and sun do not rise and fall. It is only from the position of earth that there is rising and setting. But from the position of the universe, there is no rising and there is no setting. And yet, we still have to live on earth.

So, open your mouth, already big mistake.
Don't open your mouth, even bigger mistake.
Not opening, not keeping closed, what can you do?

[listens]

Thank you for listening.